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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the research on violence in public schools in the U.S. Recent books and articles were analyzed to determine the extent of the problem so as to identify motives that lead students to commit acts of violence, and to survey various types of programs designed to prevent violence. Results show that violent acts occur in over half of public schools in the U.S. These incidences occur most often in urban schools but they also happen in rural schools. The data available on violence are generally obtained through self-reporting data, and often statistics are not kept in a precise way, making it difficult to determine the exact number of violent incidences each year. Despite this lack of precision, a variety of program and strategies have been designed to prevent violence in the schools. There are curricular programs that involve character education or conflict mediation; programs that encourage students to feel connected to a responsible adult; and zero-tolerance policies and schools that require students to wear uniforms. Steps are identified that can help schools design a program that will meet their specific needs. Starting early in socializing children is deemed important. (RJM)

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Preventing School Violence:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This investigation was designed to review the research on violence in the public school of the United States. Over thirty-five recent books and articles were analyzed to determine the extent of the problem, to identify motives that lead students to commit acts of violence, and to survey various types of programs designed to prevent violence.

It was determined that violent acts occur in over half of the public schools in the United States each year. These incidences occur most often in urban schools but they happen in rural schools as well. The data that is available on incidences of violence is generally obtained though self-reporting data. Often statistics are not kept in a precise way therefore; it is difficult to determine the precise number of violence incidences each year.

There are a variety of programs and strategies designed to prevent violent incidences in our schools. There are curricular programs that involve character education or conflict mediation. There are programs that encourage students to feel connected to a responsible adult. There are zero-tolerance policies and schools that require students to wear uniforms. While each of these programs and policies have had some success it is important that each school design a program that specifically addresses the needs of their student population. As a result steps are identified that can help schools design a program that will meet their specific needs.

The conclusion reached was that most effective way to prevent school violence is to start early helping children unlearn aggressive and antisocial behavior.

Preventing School Violence

Violence in public schools has become a growing concern for educators nationwide. The recurring incidences illustrated in the media have elevated the level of apprehension over the number and severity of violent acts committed in the nation's public schools. As society in general becomes increasingly violent so do public schools. The violence has not been relegated to large urban areas it has manifested in rural areas as well. "School Violence may be defined as any deliberate act that harms or threatens to harm a student, teacher, or other school officials, and which interferes with the purpose of school"(SchoolNet Quarterly Focus, 1996). Interfering with or disrupting the school day by a student is not a new occurrence. Students have always had varying levels of behavior problems, which have to some degree disrupted the school day. In the 1980s however, the level of disruption by students made a distinct shift from discourteous and inappropriate behaviors to violent behaviors that resulted in the involvement of law enforcement officials. Elementary school teachers reported that students who disrupt the classroom have increased from forty-eight percent in 1984 to sixty-five percent in 1997 (Rose, L. C., Gallup, A. M. & Elam, S. M., 1997). Juvenile arrests for murder rose nationwide by 85 percent between 1987 and 1991 according to a report by the National School Board Association (Natale, 1994). The violent behaviors by students at school are increasing in number of incidences and in level of intensity as we move into the new millennium.

This literature review was designed to investigate violence in public schools. Over thirty-five recent books and articles were scrutinized to identify the level of violence that occurs in public schools in the United States and to identify programs that have been used to successfully intervene and prevent violence in public schools.

Scope of the Violence

Every year three million thefts and violent crimes occur on or near school campuses. Once every six seconds a student or teacher in the United States is the victim of a crime. During the 1980's, 11,000 people died as the results of high school youths carrying guns. The National League of Cities reported that between 1990 and 1994 school violence increased 55 percent in large cities and 41 percent in cities of 100,000 or more citizens (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). A national survey found that at least one out of five students and one out of ten teachers have been victims of school violence (Kreiner, 1996). Fifty-seven percent of public elementary and secondary school principals reported that one or more incidents of violence occurred in their schools and were reported to law enforcement officials during the 1996-97 school year. Most of the statistics that are a part of public records occurred during or before the 1996-97 school year. That appears to be the first year that schools were asked to report the number of incidences of serious crimes. The crimes included in this category were murder, suicide, rape or other types of sexual battery, physical attacks or fighting with a weapon, robbery, physical attacks or fights without a weapon, theft, larceny, and vandalism. Forty-five percent of elementary schools reported at least one crime. Seventy-four percent of middle schools and 77 percent of high schools reported at least one crime. Approximately 190,000 fights or physical attacks not involving weapons, 115,000 thefts, 11,000 physical attacks or fights in which weapons were used and 4,000 incidents of rape

or other types of sexual battery were reported in the nation's public school during the 1996-97 academic year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998).

One half of all violent crimes against teenagers occurred in school buildings, on school property, or on the street. Weapons were involved in the commission of twelve percent of all crimes committed on school property. Shooting or hostage situations have occurred in 35 states and the District of Columbia. In 1990, the nation experienced a record juvenile violent crime arrest rate. Between 1980 and 1990 school reports indicate that murder increased 87 percent and aggravated assault increased 64 percent (Uniform Crime Report, 1993).

School violence data is generally self-reported and based on surveys completed by principals, teachers and students. As a result the data is often incomplete and the system of categorizing the acts of violence is often inconsistent (Uniform Crime Report, 1993). The effect of this sparse record keeping is the difficulty in producing an accurate measure of crime in our public schools. Accepting the records as they exist you find that the larger the school, the more likely it was to report a serious violent crime. One third of the schools with an enrollment of 1,000 or more students reported at least one serious violent crime during the period of investigation. In comparison between 4 and 9 percent of schools with fewer than 1,000 students enrolled reported a serious violent crime (National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners, 1996).

Motive for Violence

The causes of school violence are difficult to detect however there are factors that are generally associated with the occurrence of violence. These factors generally indicate violence that may be unrelated to the school environment. Factors such as exposure to severe family violence, psychiatric and psychological disorders, and emotional deprivation are experiences that have reinforced violent tendencies. They appear to be of significant motivation for violence to occur. Students who have been the victims of abuse or who display cruelty to animals, extreme temper tantrums, and verbal aggression are some of the early predictors of violent behavior. Certain events often trigger violent occurrences or increase the opportunity for them to occur. The availability of a weapon, substance abuse, loss of a love relationship, or perceived insults to self-esteem may precipitate a violent event (Rich, 1992).

The influence of the media was also an issue that has been studied to determine its influence on children. Children under the age of eighteen spend more time watching television than they do anything other than sleeping. Many early studies were inconclusive on the effect of viewing violence on school age children. More recent studies have, however found media viewing habits to be a germane issue. A relationship has been found between television violence and children's aggressive behavior (U.S. Public Health Services, 1972; Freedman, 1984).

Psychologists say that mind-altering substances such as drugs and alcohol bring out emotions of rage and anger. A culture that combines violent behavior as a way of gaining respect within a group of teenagers with easy availability to guns, knives, and other weapons and you have the ingredients for violent acts to occur. Many schools exacerbate the situation by allowing over crowded classrooms and schools (Guetzloe, 1995).

Strategies to Reduce School Violence

Schools have two basic reactions to violent acts committed by students. Schools can be either proactive or reactive. In the former, school officials can attempt to determine if any warning signs or early predictors are present then begin corrective intervention to prevent the violent behavior. Children exhibiting these behaviors can be closely monitored and mentored. In the latter, officials can wait until violent incidences occur then enlist the assistance of the law enforcement officials or other appropriate agencies to handle the behavior (James, 1995).

Proactive interventions generally include various curriculum-based programs and strategies. Companies throughout the United States offer programs geared toward peer mediation, conflict resolution, anger management, and other general violence prevention programs. Many school systems have reported positive results with these programs. In a 1988-98 study of three community school systems, 71 percent of teachers reported that students were less violent after completing one of the intervention programs (Volokh, 1997).

Comprehensive programs to prevent school violence are designed to replace violent behaviors with nonviolent ones. Schools may accomplish this by providing significant adults who can establish a relationship with the children who have experienced some of the factors that tend to motivate them to commit violent acts. Creating these positive relationships helps meet the need for nurturing often lacking in children who commit acts of violence. Educators cannot meet all the nurturing needs of the children but they can teach them how to work, cooperate, and share with others. Schools can open their doors in the evening, on weekends, and during the summer for extracurricular activities that provide an alternative place for children to hang out (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development identified a number of child-centered comprehensive plans for intensive intervention and prevention of school violence. Personalizing the school is one approach recommended to help students feel more connected. Overcrowded schools and classes are seen as an impetus to school violence. Smaller classes allow educators to get to know their students and to form steady, caring relationships with them as well as allowing student to get to know each other. The result may be the development of skills and relationships that are critical to the socialization process (ASCD, 1997).

ASCD also recommends conflict resolution. Decades of research on conflict resolution have produced techniques for de-escalation and resolution of conflicts. Properly designed and implemented conflict resolution programs offer students alternative methods of dealing with feelings and behaviors that could intensify. These programs offer teachers tools for managing hostilities constructively (ASCD, 1997).

Schools should also bolster and support the development of good character. ASCD sees character development as the missing piece in violence prevention programs. Without students being able to empathize with others and be self-disciplined, schools run the risk of becoming places where students' spirits are suppressed and depressed. Instead of being responsive to

student needs schools will deal with violence on the surface with metal detectors and security guards, which could lead to more alienation (ASCD, 1997).

The numbers of reactive programs available are extensive. They span the gamut from uniforms and dress codes to Zero-tolerance policies, police offices, metal detectors, and random searches in the school. There have been a number of district wide policies instituted that have effectively lowered the incidence of violence in public schools across the United States. Identifying the cause of the violent act appears to be a first step in deciding on the course of action that will discourage the violence. Before a mandatory school uniform policy schools was instituted in the Long Beach Unified School District, the district was plagued by school violence. It was determined that the majority of the violence was caused by gang rivalry. The district has reported a thirty-six percent drop in school violence since the uniform policy was instituted in 1994 (Guetzloe, 1995).

Zero-tolerance policies have also been effective in many school districts. Zero-tolerance means that carrying a dangerous weapon, drinking alcohol, using or dealing drugs, or fighting is not tolerated. Any student who violates this strict code is subject to being suspended from school for a semester or more, depending on the seriousness of the offense. As a result of the vigorous enforcement of zero-tolerance policies in the San Diego Unified School District and numerous individual school such as the Robert E. Lee High School in Houston, Texas there has been a significant decrease in the number of acts of violence (James, 1995).

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory's Midwest Regional Center for Drug Free Schools and Communities identified the following ten steps for preventing and reducing school violence:

1. Acknowledge the problem,
2. Assess the situation,
3. Develop a comprehensive approach to school violence,
4. Teach pro-social skills,
5. Offer conflict resolution training and services,
6. Harden the target (by taking security measures),
7. Establish and maintain disciplinary standards,
8. Discourage gang activity,
9. Prevent weapon concealment, and
10. Institute alternative education programs (Midwest Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools & Communities, 1993).

Conclusions and Recommendations

There appears to be some confusion about how to deal effectively with violence in schools. While some may view items like school uniforms as a soothing solution for immediate concerns, others view it as a bandage over a more substantial problem (Simms, 1996). Still others see Zero tolerance policies as not being flexible enough to deal with extenuating circumstances, e.g. Students who fights to protect themselves from bullies are frequently given the same penalty as the bullies (Rozycki, 1994).

President Clinton called attention to the issue of violence in the nation's schools in a State of Union address, a White House Press Release and in his call for the creation of an annual report card on school violence (Siegel, 1996; Clinton, 1996; Department of Education, 1996). The President's call for a Report Card on School violence was in response to the fact that thirty-four states do not have reporting systems to track crimes and violence in schools except those required by the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Department of Education, 1998).

Six thousand ninety-three students were expelled from school during the 1996-97 academic school year for bringing firearms or explosives to school. Fifty-six percent of the students expelled were high school students and thirty-four percent were junior high students (Department of Education, 1998). In light of the fact that middle and high students have been less likely to respond positively to dress codes, school uniform, and other policies, the implication is clear that prevention efforts must target the older student (Siegel, 1996).

One successful program in the South Bronx in New York City was implemented at Samuel Grompers Vocational-Technical High School. The principal, Victor Herbert took the following actions:

- In cooperation with the police captain, the same two officers responded to all calls from the school. The officers came to know the students, helped school staff patrol school grounds and were stationed nearby for drug trafficking.
- Security guards and faculty were stationed outside every bathroom and hall sweeps were organized during class periods.
- A drug education program was established with the police and community organizations for teachers, students and parents that emphasized recognizing the signs of drug use.
- Companies were persuaded to provide after-school jobs for students who were drug-free.
- A computerized attendance system was installed to notify parents of their children's absence. Special paraprofessionals worked to locate absentees and bring them back to school (Toby, 1994).

While some may feel that the actions taken at Samuel Grompers was excessive, it was very successful in turning a serious problem into a workable situation for students, teachers and parents. Successes at middle schools and high schools that have been less stringent have not been publicized if they exist.

According to Natale (1994) the most effective way to prevent school violence is to start early in the lives of the children. Schools play a crucial role in violence prevention. Schools can help children unlearn aggressive and antisocial behavior. They do have a responsibility, however they are not alone. The community must assist by working to eradicate poverty, alleviate family stress, improve the job outlook for young people, curb violence in the media, and control access to drugs and guns. Violence in the nation's schools is every citizen's responsibility.

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